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AN OVERVIEW: ROLE OF TAI-PHAKE WOMEN IN PRESENT DAY SCENARIO

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ABSTRACT

Women of India has been transformed many folds from the Ancient period following Medieval period, Pre-Independence, and Post-Independence to the present Smart India. Since women of urban areas as well as of rural areas are achieving their goals day by day but on the other side, still, they are facing many psychological, economical, gender discrimination, domestic violence due to dowry or for some other reason, health issues, sexual harassment, trafficking, etc. In this present study, an attempt has been made to show the difference, adaptation, advantage and the disadvantage of transformation. As it is globally known, Assam is a land of many ethnic groups, having various languages, cultures and religions. To touch each and every culture in a single work is next to impossible; therefore, here women of a prominent tribe i.e, Tai Phake, is going to be briefly discussed, that is, the inhabitants of Phaneng village, Margherita, Tinsukia District; Namphake and Tipamphake village, Naharkatia, Dibrugarh District; and of Guwahati City, Assam, India . Tai-Phake community has a glorious culture and tradition. The studied population has successful achievement in maintaining its ethnicity and in preserving its distinct identity through ages (Kakoty, 2013). Thus, it can be said that the Tai-Phakes trying hard to keep their legacy and rich culture alive, moving forward with modernization, keeping their roots intact.

KEYWORDS: Tradition, Psychological, Gender discrimination, Tribe, Health.

I. INTRODUCTION

Women of urban areas as well as of rural areas are achieving their goals day by day, but on the other side, still, they are facing many psychological, economical, gender discrimination, domestic violence due to dowry or for some other reason, health issues, sexual harassment, trafficking, etc. In high-income societies, non-communicable diseases predominate in the 10 leading causes of death. By contrast, in low-income societies, maternal and perinatal conditions and communicable diseases are prominent and account for over 38% of total female deaths. The adverse impact on health of low socio-economic status is compounded for women by gender inequities. Social attitude to the role of women lags much behind the law. The attitude which considers women fit for certain jobs and not for others, cause prejudice in those who recruit employees. Working women are often subject to sexual harassment either in their offices or in public places and transports. Again, the health of older women varies significantly from culture to culture and country to country. Because women tend to marry older men, and because women usually live longer, many older women will be widows. In most cases, they adjust both emotionally and financially to their changed situation. Trafficking is also a leading problem which includes exploitation of girls. Whereas talking about the health issues, although men are just as likely to be infertile as women, their female partners are more often stigmatized and blamed when couples fail to produce offspring.

In this paper, a modest attempt has been made to discuss the position of Tai-Phake women of Assam and show the difference, adaptation, advantage and the disadvantage of transformation. As it is globally known, Assam is a land of many ethnic group and having varied languages, cultures and religions. To touch each and every culture in a single work is next to impossible; therefore, here, women of a prominent tribe 'Tai Phakial or Tai-Phake' is going to be briefly discussed, i.e., of Phaneng village, Margherita, Tinsukia District; Namphake and Tipamphake village, Naharkatia, Dibrugarh District; and of Guwahati City, Assam, India.

II. METHODOLOGY

Empirical data has been collected from Phaneng gaon Margherita, Tinsukia District; Namphake and Tipamphake village, Naharkatia, Dibrugarh District; and of Guwahati City. The data principally collected by the accepted method of social sciences like observation, interview, case study, and informal chatting

III. ABOUT THE STUDIED POPULATION

The Tai-Phake tribe is an important tribal group of Assam. The Tai-Phakes entered Assam in 1775 A.D during the reign of the Ahom king Lakshmi Sinha (1769-1780 A.D) and settled at Nangtao of present Arunachal Pradesh. They belong to the great Tai race. Ethnically, they belong to the Mongoloid race and linguistically they belong to the Tibeto- Chinese families (Kakoty, 2013) and followers of Buddhism. During the British rule, the Phakes divided into two broad groups of *'Barphakial'* and *'Namphakial'* and settled along the Buridihing river.

The *Tai Phake* people are bilingual. They speak Phake language among themselves and speak Assamese with an outsider. The Phake language is similar to those of Shan. They have their own script and also have preserved pristine scriptures in religious centres where their script is conspicuous.

Tai Phakes follow the Tai calendar. Independent on the western calendars, in their calendar they have eight working days and after that there are two holidays.

The staple food of the Tai-Phakes is rice. Several kinds of vegetables, fruits, pulses, chicken, eggs, and fishes are consumed by them. Dried fishes are delicious food item for them. Boiled vegetables are preferred; they hardly use oil to prepare food. The sticky rice which they eat is made with a special technique. This traditional method of cooking rice is called *Tang hou he.* The rice is made in double decked pots. The pot contains rice. Hot water is added at regular intervals to this rice in the upper pot. This method of preparing rice makes it sticky. When the rice is cooked, it is spread on a bamboo plate called *dolla* and then cooled. This rice is made in morning by the ladies of Tai Phake family. Then small portions of rice are made and are stored in leaves, known as Kopat. These small portions of rice are called as *Hou khaw*.

Every year, their month starts from the month of April. *'Poi-sang-ken'* is the major festival of the Tai Phakes. It marks the beginning of New Year in the Tai calendar. It is celebrated for three days. Basically it starts from 13th or 14 April every year. In this festival people throw water on each other which signifies washing away the sins of one another. They also cleanse Buddha images and statues from household shrines as well as from monasteries by gently pouring water over them.

'Buddha Purnima' is also a major festival of the Tai Phakes. It marks the birthday of Lord Gautama Buddha. On this day the people gather in the Buddhist Monastery, offer prayers to the God, lighten candles and hoist their own flag. This is followed by a feast. Generally this festival falls in the month of May.

'Poi-san-kha' is a festival which is celebrated during the full moon day. During this festival, seven different Tai-Phake villages make a group. Every year, one of village should organize this occasion (rotation wise). Here, the villagers take the blessings from each and every priest of the seven different villages and they touch their feet according to ascending order of their knowledge such as Molang, Dibang, Bar-Phakial, Kamba and so on. It is just like a meeting which is also followed by feast and other cultural programmes.

'Bailum-phai or Mai-ko-sung-phai' is solemnized in the month of January. They used to make small huts of bamboo and hay and piles of wood and hay which are set on fire by the people at late evening of this day. During this occasion they gather in the place and have feast.

The main stay of the Tai Phakes is agriculture. They cultivate crops such as paddy, mustard, vegetables, and a small amount of tea. They also have other subsidiary sources of income from which the people earn good income. They also rear cattle, buffaloes and pigs.

The Tai Phake women wear colorful dresses woven by them. Their outfit consists of an ankle-long skirt *'chin',* a blouse *'nang-wat'* open at the front, and fastened around the armpits and a girdle *'chai-chin'* to tighten the skirt around the waist. The marriage dress comprises of *'Nanguak-Pochung'* and *'Sinai'.* The female child wears a skirt *'chin'* and a blouse. A white turban *'phahu'* is worn by the women folk on individual preference. The colors of their dresses are expressive

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of their ages. The girls wear white sarongs; women stripped red, yellow and green sarongs and old women deep purple and blue sarongs with stripes. The men wear lungis known as *'phaphotoon'*, a kurta or shirt, and a folded long shawl. *'Baikhaho'* is a typical silver hair clip. It is made of either of gold or silver. It is may be of various shapes such as flower or a traditional conical hat made from tightly woven bamboo and/or cane and a large, palm leaf *'Japi',* etc. Usually it is gifted to the bride from the groom's family or by the villagers.

For personal adornment the Phake women wear very few ornaments. In fact married and elderly women do not show much interest in ornaments. It was reported that till 1950 the elderly women used an ear ornament made of transparent crystal material i.e, '*Kenhu*' but since that year the supply of that material became irregular and the Phake women had to opt for modern ornaments like ear ring, bracelets, gold ring, necklaces etc. It was also reported that till 1950 necklace made of silver coins was considered as valuable ornament by the womenfolk, but today this type of necklace is hardly seen. The reason is that old silver rupee and half rupee coins contained much metal value and the villagers, therefore, exchanged those silver ornaments for much higher price in terms of new coins, which however, contain less metal value. The married women wear a pair of bangles (*'Beyan'*) made of either gold or silver. Gold or silver ring ('*Ungehop'*) is also worn by those who can afford. Necklace made of small beads is worn by the small children in order to avoid dangers from evil spirits. Bead armlets are used by some elderly people of all the three villages for similar purpose. Objects of natural beauty like flowers are special favorites of the teenage girls who wear those in their hair (Gedney, 1992).

The Phake still live in houses made up of bamboo and wood, built on raised platforms, known as 'stilt houses', they call them as *'Chang ghars'*. There are two hearths in each house and the inside one is considered as sacred. Every house has a drawing room called *'kan nok',* a prayer room called *'khok tang-som'* with a kitchen called *'haun aom'*. In each and every house they have their own loom.

The Tai Phake society is mainly agriculture based, confined to household and religious works, feel comfortable and trust each other but they used to face problems like low self esteem, economical, health issues, domestic violence, extremist fear. When a woman leave their village and settled over urban area, they face loneliness; neither they can interact with their neighbor freely nor they can trust them; no religious places; unable to come out of their place at night due to teasing, molestation, snatching, and fear of rape.

IV. PROBLEMS FACED BY WOMEN OF RURAL AREAS

It seems that women of all the three villages are not much literate, confined to the household works except few ones, economically backward, having health issues, economically backward. Though, they slowly getting affected by sanskritization and adopting new techniques such as television, mobile phones, electricity, etc. but, still their whole world revolve as a homemaker and desire to preserve their culture. A simple example can be described regarding the transformation with the help of an ego. The grandmother, mother and the ego shows the three generation transformation. A simple grandmother (majority illiterate) always wake up early; feed all the poultry, pigs, etc; do household works; cooks; weaves; do religious works; and take care of their spouse, children and grandchildren. In a single word, we can say she always remain busy till night. But in case of the mother, a little bit change has been seen, she woke up early; prepare breakfast and tiffin; drop off and pick up child from school; completes their homework; helps mother-in-law in preparing dinner. And, lastly, 'the transformed ego', they can operate mobile phones, television, radio, etc., effortlessly; quick learners; and most importantly, modernization and sanskritization affecting them.

Tai Phakes are not much advance in the educational or in technical fields, but they have preserved their own roots. They still live in 'stilt houses', bamboo and wood houses built on raised platforms; and are mostly engaged in agriculture, rearing pigs, practice religious customs and so on. It seems that, in these societies, maternal and perinatal conditions and communicable diseases are prominent and account for over 38% of total female deaths. This may be due to lack of proper transportation to the hospital, due to poor reproductive health practices. Women of low economic status stigmatized and blamed when couples fail to produce offspring, although men are just as likely to be infertile as women. Experts estimate that 70% of the maternal-related deaths are preventable. Good sanitation and nutrition and avoiding overwork and stress will improve the health of Indian women (Chakraborty, 2012).

V. PROBLEMS FACED BY WOMEN OF URBAN AREA

Social transformation of women is an essential element in national development. Since women constitute half of the population there can be no developments unless the needs and interests of women are fully taken into account. In fact, transformed women are a nation's strength (Dominic, 2011). Even though, women of urban area transformed many folds but still they rear their children and elderly persons; do household and religious works; weaving; rear pigs, poultry, etc. A very few families of Tai Phake population have migrated from small towns and villages to Guwahati and other Metro Cities. Women migrate to get high education and achieve their goals. Though they achieved their goals in every field but several problems they used to face such as gender inequality in education, employment and health; sexual harassment; racial discrimination, etc. Women reside outside Assam mainly face racial discrimination; people call them *'Chinki'* due to their mongoloid appearance. In 2015, Supreme Court of India, calling people of northeastern origin by "derogatory" names such as *'chinki'* may land one in jail for up to five years with fine, besides being non-bailable.

It hampers the overall wellbeing because blocking women from participation in social, political and economic activities can adversely affect the whole society. The inbuilt conviction that women are incapable of handling arduous jobs and are less efficient than men influences the payment of unequal salaries and wages for the same job.

VI. CONCLUSION

Factors Responsible for Preservation of Ethnicity(Kakoty, 2013)

The following factors are responsible for preservation of ethnicity by the Tai-Phake community:-

- *Attitude of the people towards their culture.*
- *Strong desire on the part of both the adults as well as the youngsters to preserve their culture.*
- *Ability of the people to judge themselves and the effect of modernism on their culture.*
- *Adoption of new techniques but still adhering to their age old beliefs.*
- *Not challenging traditional customs and practices.*

Like other communities, the Tai-Phake has also been influenced by modernization in various aspects such as economic, political, social and cultural. Adoption of the modernity of the Buddhist cultures from neighboring cultures has definitely affected these people. The changes are prominently noticed in daily household items like- television, computer, radio, electricity, telephone, toiletries and so on. In spite of these effects of modernism, Tai-Phake community of all the studied population has successful in maintaining its ethnicity and in preserving its distinct identity through ages (Kakoty, 2013).

Till date, whenever they used to go to their religious place as well as in any festival, both male and female wear their traditional attire.

As educational level is getting higher, their age at marriage is increasing gradually, so that the maternal and infant mortality rate.

And, most importantly, in their own societies girls are not at all neglected. Thus, it can be said that the Tai-Phakes moving forward with modernization, keeping their foots intact with their distinct identity.

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SNAPS



Tai Phake children in traditional attire



One of the Tai-Phake script



Tai calendar



With one of the informant



Buddhist monarchy of one of the village



Inner view of the Buddhist monarchy



Traditional attire



Stilt house (Chang Ghar)



Household temple



Traditional Silver hair clip



Household kitchen



Household loom